Troubles from Team Land: How to Resolve Team Conflict

Despite all that can go right with teams, some issues can certainly go wrong. When problems arise in a team, they need to be dealt with swiftly to avoid damage to team camaraderie and work output. Dealing with conflict may be simple for some, but for others it can be dreadfully uncomfortable. This article will look at tips and tricks for dealing with various types of conflicts your team may have.

General Tips on How to Confront Group Issues

As was already mentioned, it is important to deal with team conflict soon after it arises. Do not let issues fester and resentment build, and do not resort to talking "behind someone's back." If you know that Shawn feels hurt by something Lee said during your group meeting, don't avoid the issue or complain to each other about Lee; talk about it calmly as a group with Lee. If you know the PowerPoint slide your team has designed is too visually overwhelming, point it out so the group can fix it. If you're feeling like your opinion is not being valued by the team, let them know.

Be aware, though, that *how* you confront issues in a group can greatly affect whether the group improves from the feedback or implodes because of it. What follows are some tips to keep confrontations from feeling too, well, confrontational:

- **Speak non-judgmentally and specifically.** Don't make assumptions about people's feelings or intentions and avoid speaking in vague, general terms ("You don't value my opinions"). Instead, discuss others' actions in a more objective manner. Specifically point out the behaviors that are problematic ("I've mentioned a few times now that we cannot have this many images and words on one slide, but each time, the subject of conversation changed and we didn't come back to it.") and calmly express how those actions make you feel ("I'm feeling frustrated, and I'm nervous about getting major point deductions for this.").
- **Avoid absolutes.** Words like "never" and "always" are not helpful in an argument. If you accuse someone of "never listening" or "always being rude," that person is likely to get defensive because they know that they don't *always* act poorly. Again, be specific about what the offending action was so that it can be discussed rationally.
- **Focus on the path forward.** Winning is a good feeling, but winning an argument should not be the goal of a confrontation. The goal of telling your team that you feel undervalued should not be to make them feel bad about themselves or even just to make yourself feel heard. The goal should be to fix this troubling communication pattern so that everyone can be productive and happy moving forward. To that end, you cannot dwell on your own hurt feelings or the wrongs that have already occurred. Express the problem and then move on to how your team can fix it. Stay solution-oriented.
- **Remember to listen and to compromise.** Your way is not always the right way. Your opinion is not the only one that matters. Listen to everyone's thoughts and make strong

efforts to understand others' point of view. Have each side summarize the other side's opinions ("Taryn, you are saying that we need to move forward and finish the PowerPoint because our presentation is soon, and you don't think we have the time to fix this slide. Is that right?"). Then try to devise a solution that will work—at least to some degree—for everyone.

- **If all else fails, employ a mediator.** Ask someone not involved in the conflict (someone with no "skin in the game," so to speak) to guide the conversation. The mediator can help ensure that both sides get the opportunity to speak and can help guide discussions about reasonable resolutions. Your instructor can, of course, play that role if your team is that conflicted.

Figure 1. Uh oh. Somehow Amy has been isolated from the group. Her team needs to find ways to bring her back into the fold…and Sarah's "stink eye" is not helping.
Image by Isabel Chenoweth, 2014.

Specific Conflict Scenarios for Presentation Teams

I'm happy to report that within my many (*many*) years of teaching, I've had few teams that have had major conflicts within them…but it does happen. Let's look at some scenarios that teams have encountered and potential solutions you could use to deal with them:

The Social Loafer

Of those student work groups that experience conflict, the most common complaint is an uneven workload (Burdett, 2003). In particular, students feel frustrated when one or more teammates don't "pull their own weight" within the group. "Social loafers," as these less-motivated teammates are termed, tend to exert less effort on a task when working in a group than they would if they were working individually (Karau & Hart, 1998). Gone unchecked, even a single social loafer can have a significant negative impact on the entire team.

When the group recognizes that a social loafer is within its ranks, one or more team members should confront the loafer to deal with the issue directly. *Confronting*, however, does

not mean *berating*, and dealing with the issue directly does not inevitably have to lead to an argument. Instead try the following steps:

- **First, ask the social loafer why their contributions have been less than the other team members in a non-judgmental way.** Aim for more of a concerned "Are you all right?" vibe than an annoyed "What is wrong with you?" one. Perhaps your teammate is having personal issues or an illness they'll need help accommodating, or perhaps they are unaware they are working below their expected capacity.
- **As mentioned above, it's important to identify the specific behaviors you find troubling without judgment.** In other words, say something like "We've been texting you specifically in the group chat, but you haven't responded for the last five days" (descriptive) instead of "You don't care about this presentation or our grade" (judgmental).
- **Remind the loafer that their contributions are important** (and if you've divided the presentation appropriately, their contributions should really be important): "You're the one who knows the most about other schools' shuttle programs. We really need you to work with us so we can use that data in the argument."
- **Ask the social loafer if what changes they need to the group rules or dynamics to help them feel more comfortable participating.** Be willing to adjust as a group to help bring the loafer back into the team's dynamic.

Ultimately, use this situation as a problem-solving opportunity to reestablish a collaborative team environment. Only if all else truly fails should you sidestep the loafer and redistribute tasks to ensure a successful project completion.

Groupthink

It's a bit ironic to put *groupthink* in a section about conflict when it is essentially the absence of conflict, but groupthink certainly is a major problem groups can have. Coined by Irving Janis (1972), **groupthink** occurs when group members feel such a pressure to conform (either real or imagined) that they abandon the critical thinking needed to generate quality ideas. Sometimes this happens because the group dynamic seems to demand conformity: opposing viewpoints are quickly dismissed by the group, dissenting members feel forced into silence, and no one bothers to try to question the group decisions again.

Other times, groupthink happens when everyone is genuinely happy with the team. The group begins to think as one cohesive unit, members get excited by the team's ideas, and no one stops to question the validity of the group's plans. While in some ways this may seem like an ideal scenario—one without arguing where team members are able to work hard on their project without any disagreements or needs for compromise—conflict (at least the constructive kind) is a healthy and necessary part of teamwork. I've encountered groups before that eagerly told me ideas for their projects that clearly no one in the group had vetted. The plans were illogical or impractical, but the group members were excited by each other's excitement and didn't critically

analyze their ideas. A little scrutiny from me or from students in other groups quickly pointed out the gaping holes in the team's ideas.

To avoid the trap of groupthink, it is important that one or more members within your team take on the role of the **devil's advocate**. This person's job is to be the friendly critic who offers counterpoints and counterarguments to the team's ideas, even if that person likes those ideas. Work in time in group meetings to challenge your team's decisions and reiterate the value in doing so. This will help group members feel less defensive when getting critiques, as they will soon realize that critical feedback is merely part of the planning process, not a personal attack.

If your group is still struggling to critically examine its own work, invite outsiders (especially those comfortable with sharing their honest feedback) to hear and critique your ideas. Listen carefully to the feedback you receive and resolve to make the adjustments necessary to accommodate those comments.

Violations of the Group Rules

When you establish group rules and norms, you would like to think that individual members will follow them to stay in the group's favor, but, as you well know, that's not always the case. If a teammate continually violates group rules (like, for instance, playing on their phone during group meetings when the group rule is to put phones away), their behavior might indicate a feeling of disconnection from the team. Redouble your efforts at helping everyone feel like a part of the group, as belonging tends to lead to higher levels of compliance (Marwell & Schmitt, 1967). If that still doesn't work and your code of conduct isn't resulting in the behavior the group wants, then you need to establish consequences for breaking the rules. Sit the whole group down, reiterate how much you need everyone's input and help, and then draw up the consequences together.

For the group presentations in CMS 101, you will have the ability to affect each other's grade on the assignment. At the end of each team presentation, you will decide as a group the amount of effort each member put into the project, which will directly affect their individual presentation grade. You can discuss as a group—including the violator—about what amount of percentage loss is reasonable for each rule violation and write it into your group rules.

Extreme Behavior

Of all the scenarios we've covered, extreme behavioral issues are the least common. I do, however, feel it is important to draw the proverbial line in the sand for you. Although very rare, there are groups in which major personality clashes happen. These often arise from differences in communication styles (e.g., one person is loud and enjoys debate, while another is reserved and sees direct confrontation as a personal attack). Usually, these types of clashes can be resolved through discussions about how group members communicate best and finding ways to work together through the conflict. While conflict can be stressful, it is generally fixable. For the vast majority of the issues that groups will face, teams can and should resolve them on their own using the advice already covered in this article.

If, however, any team member's communication has crossed lines of appropriateness in ways that would violate Southern's Student Code of Conduct—like using racial slurs, sexually aggressive language, threats, or other equally abhorrent vitriol—then your duty is to report the behavior to your instructor and/or to the University. You do not deserve to be talked to in that manner, nor should you have to feel unsafe while completing a school project. Take yourself out of the line of fire and let someone with more authority deal with the issue.

Conflict: The Necessary Evil

While this article discusses some of the potential hazards of teamwork, working with others has far more positives than negatives, which is why teamwork will likely be a constant in your academic and professional life. While conflict can be frustrating within a team and sour what might otherwise feel like a positive experience, remember that conflict can provide opportunities to strengthen your team and your ideas. When two team members argue about a particular aspect of your team plan, their conflict provides you the chance to critically examine which of the two directions is best. When team members find frustration with each other's communication styles, that conflict allows you the opportunity to explore how you communication and how you can better adapt to others. Remember that most conflict is resolvable. Avoid destructive conflict by taking the steps enumerated in this article to help your team grow together and reap the many benefits of working with others.

Figure 2. Yay! Our team has resolved their conflict and are now progressing forward productively.
Image by Isabel Chenoweth, 2014.

References

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